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## Posthuman Memory and the Re(f)use Economy in *Micmacs à Tire-larigot*

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Jean-Pierre Jeunet's 2009 film *Micmacs à Tire-larigot* depicts a ragtag bunch of misfits who live beneath a refuse dump and give a new lease of life to objects discarded by others, endowing these objects with what might be called "reuse value." From Benjamin's ragpicker to Varda's *glaneuse*, the idea of *la récupé* (salvage) is a familiar trope in European culture—and it is, no doubt aptly, recuperated in Jeunet's film. The underground dwellers in *Micmacs* comprise a re(f)use economy, resisting against (or refusing) global consumer culture's redemptive supplementarity, or the deployment of purchasing power in an attempt to fill a perceived void. This community embodies a hacker ethics, rejecting the distinction between producer and consumer. Unlike exchange value, which obscures the past labour that produced the commodity, reuse value reflects the past use to which the object was put. Reuse flies in the face of planned obsolescence, which gives rise to the desire to buy more objects and to replace old things with new ones that have no history of use. From the point of view of use, such replacement masks history, as commodity fetishism obscures the power relations behind the production of the object. Conversely, *la récupé* enfolds history into objects, imbuing them with reuse value and making of them an exteriorized, prostheticized form of human memory analogous to film and other media, whose functions *Micmacs* invites us to contemplate. The double-edged nature of the re(f)use economy, which both privileges resistance and underlines the

posthuman dissolution of the boundaries between people and objects, points up the pharmacological dimension (at once destructive and potentially positive) of globalisation.

*Micmacs* revolves around a video-store clerk, Bazil (Dany Boon), who seeks revenge on the manufacturers of the landmine that killed his father and the bullet that caused his own near-fatal injury. That the refuse economy depicted in the film is situated within the context of a scathing critique of the global arms industry suggests a link between overproduction and the military-industrial complex of the kind described by Georges Bataille in *La Part maudite (The Accursed Share)* (Bataille 1967: 49-80 and *passim*). By short-circuiting the cycle of planned obsolescence, excess accumulation and overproduction characteristic of advanced capitalism, the underground dwellers are also subverting the tendency of the biggest industrialized nations to expend significant portions of their gross domestic product on weapons. The arms industry is both a contributor to overproduction and a symptom of it: when there are too many things being produced, the only things left to produce are things that blow up other things, and, as it happens, other people. Bataille held up the Marshall Plan, the postwar economic aid package that the US gave to Europe, as an example of not-for-profit expenditure that could divert excess accumulation away from an otherwise inevitable military expansion (Bataille 1967: 203-225). Seen in this light, the global arms industry, which supplies weapons to far-flung warring factions, would be the negative consequence of the failure to direct excess profits where they could be put to less destructive use.

*Micmacs* begins with a brief scene set, the titles tell us, in 1979 in the Western Sahara. The camera pans across a French flag attached to a jeep, to alight on a soldier examining a landmine. We see the landmine explode in long shot, from the point of

view of some local onlookers. The scene cuts to the soldier's home in France, where his wife and son Bazil receive the news of his death, which is followed by the funeral. We then jump thirty years to 2009, when the rest of the film is set. Bazil works in a video store, where we first see him as an adult watching *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) dubbed in French, on an old VCR player, and mouthing both Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall's dialogue. Bazil is caught in the gunfire of a passing police chase, and a bullet becomes permanently lodged in his brain. When he becomes homeless after losing his job at the video store, he is taken in by a group of people who live under a refuse dump. His new companions agree to help him in his mission to exact revenge on the arms manufacturers that produced both the landmine that killed his father and the bullet that nearly killed him. This disparate group includes a female acrobat, 'La Môme Caoutchouc' (The Rubber Kid, played by Julie Ferrier) whose extremely pliable body ends up getting them out of all kinds of scrapes; a man called Fracasse (played by Jeunet regular Dominique Pinon), who claims to have broken a world record for being shot out of a cannon; an inventor who transforms the abandoned objects found in the dump into wondrous mechanical devices; a young woman with a savant-level propensity for measurements and calculations named Calcuette (Marie-Julie Baup); a nurturing mother figure, Tambouille (Yolande Moreau), who cooks for the group and generally looks after them; and an African ethnographer (Omar Sy) who records his observations on an old Remington typewriter, and whose speech consists entirely of clichés, proverbs and maxims. (It should be noted that Jeunet's work resembles Remington's speech in this way: his films, even those ostensibly set in the future, consistently point to earlier eras, and are infused with an aesthetics—and, some have argued, a politics—of nostalgia. See, for example, Kaganski 2001, and, more recently, Sancton 2009.)

Reused objects intermittently flash ‘then/now’, ‘then/now’, signifying two eras at once: that in which they were manufactured (thus the African ethnographer’s antique typewriter evokes the colonial past), and the era in which they are being reused (the not-so-post-colonial present, in which African arms dealers represent a postcolonial world of supposed lawlessness). In this way, reused objects are analogous to what Deleuze has called crystal-images, or images in films that evoke both the past and the present, and thus represent the passage of time (Deleuze 2005: 72). Reused objects might therefore be called *crystal-objects*, objects that contain and activate the past. As commodities harbour congealed labour from which they derive their value as objects of exchange, crystal-objects harbour congealed use, from which they derive their value as objects of reuse—but whereas the congealed labour is *masked* in commodities, the congealed use is at least intermittently visible in the crystal-object.

The adaptation, or hacking, of a film term, “crystal-image,” to describe the reuse of objects in a refuse economy is not entirely arbitrary. Visible in Jeunet’s film is a process of the exteriorization of human memory borrowed from industrial temporal objects, memory prostheses manufactured in the era of mechanical reproducibility whose duration is coextensive with our perception of them, such as sound recordings, television shows, and films (see Stiegler 2008: 241 and Stiegler 2011: 12). Mediatized “memories” penetrate the recesses of our consciousness, while our very capacity to remember is increasingly outsourced, exteriorized in the form of television broadcasts, databases and search engines. At the end of the film, footage of the kidnapped weapons manufacturers’ confession is posted on You Tube, in an attempt on the part of consumers (who have been fed carefully manipulated images about the arms trade) to turn the tables and act as producers, but also as a way of

inscribing a form of counter-memory into the public historical archive that the internet has created. What Jonathan Beller (2006) calls the ‘cinematic mode of production’ refers not only to cinema, but to the mechanized forms of what Bernard Stiegler calls grammatisation, or the exteriorisation of memory (see Stiegler 2010: 10-11; 29-34). Our ‘own’ memory goes out (we rely, for example, on holiday snaps and videos for access to the past), and the world’s memories are folded into our consciousness like bread dough. We become objectified subjects, another platform for the storage and retrieval of information, and the objects that populate our everyday lives in turn become animated: objects become memories, and souvenirs become *souvenirs*.

Film scholars have recently begun noting the depiction within cinema of the distribution of memory across the inanimate world (see, for example, David Martin-Jones [2013: 720] on human bodies and landscape as ‘physical repositories of memory’, and Isabelle Frances McNeill [2010: 51-86] on ‘memory objects’). These instances of what Rosi Braidotti (2013: 13) calls ‘life beyond the self’ can be situated within the emerging discourse of posthumanism, which blurs the boundaries between the human and the non-human. The attribution of memory to objects outside the human brain finds its correlate in the grammatisation techniques that Marshall McLuhan (2001) theorized as the electronic extension of the human nervous system in his landmark *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, originally published in 1964. Robert Pepperell explains how these grammatisation technologies, or the outsourcing of memory to objects outside the human brain, constitute the posthuman condition:

What makes us human is our wider technological domain, just as much as our genetic code or natural environment. Throughout history, we have sought to distribute our selves, our consciousness and our intelligence by a variety of means, including language, art, gesture, and music, by encoding the content of our minds in some material substrate, and to extend our physical abilities with tools. (Pepperell 2003: 152).

This distribution of the self is the result of humans' engagement with the world around them. Pepperell further notes that '[t]his 'extensionist' view of human nature, in contrast to the humanist view, does not therefore make a distinction between the biological substrate of the human frame (what is most often referred to as the 'human') and the wider material domain in which we exist'. (Pepperell 2003: 152). This wider material domain includes those prosthetic objects we use to enhance our human capabilities. As Stiegler has put it: 'The prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body *qua* "human"' (Stiegler 1998: 152-53). In *Micmacs*, Fracasse the human cannonball catalogues those parts of his body that are man-made (various metal plates and prosthetic inserts) which, while making him a little bit bionic, also help make him 'who he is'—like the processes of exteriorization that characterise what Stiegler refers to as 'technics', they are 'the pursuit of life by means other than life' (Stiegler 1998: 17).

These physical prosthetics thus mirror the function of memory prostheses in *Micmacs*, nowhere more so than in the image of the bullet in Bazil's brain. When the arms manufacturer who produced the bullet lodged in Bazil's head hears of his injury, he says dismissively, "Une balle dans la tête? Comme ça, ça lui donnera un souvenir de nous" (A bullet in the head? Well, that will leave him with a memory/souvenir of

us). Indeed, when he is shot, the memory of objects is carved into Basil's brain. He carries it with him wherever he goes. Nothing stops the flow of time, and memory, like a bullet to the head. Yet it is precisely such a bullet that serves as a constant reminder to Basil of his mission to avenge his father's death and his own injury. This reminder, however, is liable to cause serious damage to his brain at any moment, thus wiping out his capacity to remember. As such, the bullet in Basil's head is an apt metaphor for what Alison Landsberg (2004) has called prosthetic memory, a mediatized image that replaces personal memories in individual consciousness. *Micmacs* allegorizes this 'save as' function with images of mechanized forms of transindividual memory such as cinema itself. In addition to referring to film in general through its many images of camcorders and video stores, *Micmacs* is studded, or perhaps more accurately shot through, with references to specific films and filmmakers (*The Big Sleep*, as seen above, *Mission Impossible*, Sergio Leone, Chaplin, Buster Keaton), including and especially those by its own director. As well as employing stylistic traits that recall other films in his *oeuvre* (the warm color palette full of greens, golds and reds, the fondness for retro sets and Rube Goldbergesque contraptions, the underground community), Jeunet reuses many of his favorite actors, such as Dominique Pinon (who played Louison in *Delicatessen* and the clones in *La Cité des enfants perdus*), André Dusollier (the narrator in *Amélie*, and Pierre-Marie Rouvières in *Un Long dimanche de fiançailles*), and Yolande Moreau (the concierge in *Amélie*). There is even an explicit reference to *Delicatessen*, in the scene where Basil is trying to plant a recording device in the arms manufacturer François Marconi's apartment, and he is shown on a rooftop that looks exactly like the one at the end of *Delicatessen*. When he accidentally lowers his recorder into the wrong apartment, we see a re-enactment of the scene in *Delicatessen* when Julie and



Louison are playing a cello-and-saw duet in Julie's living room, with Dominique Pinon reprising his role as Louison. The mise-en-abîme of self-referentiality in *Micmacs* culminates in the many references to the very film we are watching, through repeated shots of a DVD case and poster advertising the film *Micmacs à tire-larigot*, identical to the DVD case and poster actually used to advertise the film. The first time we see Bazil as an adult, the poster for *Micmacs à tire-larigot*, is visible above the VCR player on which Bazil watches *The Big Sleep*. A subsequent shot even shows Dany Boon on the poster for a split second, the same actor we are watching as he watches the Bogart film. When the stray bullet from the police chase flies through the plate glass window of the video store, it shatters a DVD case for the film *Micmacs à tire-larigot*.

At these moments, the film's exterior (its advertising campaign, its physical presence as an object in a DVD case) runs seamlessly, like a Möbius strip, into its interior. These references to the finished version of the film we have not finished watching produce the opposite of the sensation of *déjà-vu*, or a kind of *pré-vu* effect—similar to the anticipatory protention that constitutes our perception of time according to Husserl (see Stiegler 2011: 17; 27-30). Likewise, the sound and motion effects that Bazil and his friends make to convince the French arms dealers they are being bundled off to the Middle East, when in fact they are taken to a vacant lot just beyond the banks of the Seine, could almost be a “making-of” documentary for the film sequence that we, like the arms dealers, are encouraged to imagine.

In this way, both the past and the future are enfolded into the present. As if to illustrate this idea, the characters in the film spend a lot of time mouthing dialogue spoken by others, making us question the individual as the originator of his or her speech. When Bazil is first made homeless, he pitches up behind a woman busking in

a Métro station, mouthing the words she sings to make passersby think that it is he who is singing. When Remington is impersonating the African dictator's associate in a meeting with Nicolas de la Fenouillet, he mouths the speech Remington recites; and Bazil is shown perfectly lip synching the dialogue of *The Big Sleep* when we first see him as an adult, implying that he has seen the film over and over again. These moments in *Micmacs* announce the film's aesthetic of *pré-vu*, suggesting that the characters might be rehearsing dialogue that has always already been uttered.

This aesthetic of *pré-vu* can help us understand what Bernard Stiegler means when he writes that consciousness is structured like cinema, an assertion that might at first seem counter-intuitive. In one sense, we can understand this to mean that consciousness is NOW structured like cinema, in an age in which we are constantly surrounded by media images from infancy. However, we may also take this statement to mean that consciousness has always been structured like cinema, since the dawn of consciousness long, long before the advent of cinema. This could only be true if time were folded in the way suggested in *Micmacs*: the film pre-exists itself. As John Douglas Macready puts it, "Films can . . . be understood as prostheticizations of our inner cinema" (Macready 2009: unpaginated). The *Micmacs* posters and DVD cases in the film *Micmacs* would seem to promulgate the idea of an 'inner cinema', which only needs to be articulated by the filmmaker, like the *parole* that activates and animates the *langue* in Saussurean linguistics (Saussure 1975). Stiegler writes: 'like cinema in life I revise the rushes, I view, I edit everything that has been repressed-archived: shots, sound and odor recordings, touch, contact, and caress recordings, I take it all up again and I undo and redo, I abbreviate' (Stiegler cited in Wills 2006: 250). Expanding on Derrida's contention that speech is always already writing, Stiegler adds that 'life (*anima* — on the side of the mental image) is always *already*

cinema (animation — image-object). The technological synthesis is not a replica, not a double of life any more than writing is a replication of speech. . . .’ (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 162).

Bazil’s doubling of Remington’s words mimics the African ethnographer’s own reuse of language in the form of hackneyed expressions, clichés and maxims. In his drive to observe and record the behavior of his French companions, Remington is an Occidentalizer. He favours recycled language, like the recycled objects, *la récup* the underground dwellers use, and like the old typewriter he types on. His name, Remington, is analogous to that of the arms dealer Marconi, whose name invokes the inventor of the radio: together, these names add to the film’s catalogue of grammatisation technologies, from typewriter to radio to photograph (the photos of landmine victims held up by Bazil and company disguised as burqa-clad women, and the photo of the amoral weapons manufacturer arm-in-arm with Nicolas Sarkozy), video store to dvd to camcorder to You Tube. Fracasse, the Human Cannonball, is not taken seriously for his record-breaking achievement until he finds his listing in a discarded copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Remington, however, is not only a well-known brand of typewriter. The name is also recognisable as a brand of gun. The association between writing and weaponry is reinforced when Marconi compares himself in a speech to Arthur Rimbaud, pointing out that the poet ended his life as an arms dealer; Marconi’s young son, upon hearing of this comparison, assumes his father is speaking not of the poet Rimbaud but of the action hero Rambo. In another version of this analogy, Paul Virilio has noted the links between the development of film technology and advances in warfare at the beginning of the twentieth century, observing, for example, that ‘the nitrocellulose that went into film stock was also used for the production of explosives’

(Virilio 1989: 15). Violence of this kind points to the pharmacological dimension of the posthuman, its double-edged nature as both remedy and poison (for a discussion of the *pharmakon*, see Derrida 1981: 61-172). As objects are endowed with a life of their own, human beings are increasingly objectified. This transference evokes what Braidotti calls, after Lyotard, the ‘inhuman(e)’ dimension of the posthuman condition. She writes, ‘If one considers the scale of the major issues confronting the contemporary world, from the financial crises and their consequences for employment and structural economic inequalities, to climate change and the ensuing environmental crises, not to mention geo-political conflicts, terrorism and humanitarian armed interventions, it is clear that the posthuman condition has engendered its own inhuman(e) dimension’ (Braidotti 2014: 110).

The reference in Jeunet’s film to Rimbaud evokes the poet’s emblematic declaration ‘Je est un autre’, ambivalent expression of both a humanizing empathy and of a posthuman extension of the ‘self’. The explosives of which the modern-day arms dealer speaks are responsible for maiming the limbless children shown in photographs by what appear to be Middle Eastern women who, when they remove their veils, turn out to be Bazil and his friends, whose masquerade is intended to shock the arms dealers into confessing their crimes. (The veil, too, is part of the film’s salvage aesthetic, drawn from the long-standing French controversy over the display of religious—i.e., ‘Muslim’—symbols in public. The act of unveiling is a wish-fulfillment of the supposedly republican desire for Muslim women to spurn the veil—and of the even greater desire that they turn out, like Bazil and company, not to be Muslim after all, in a reversal of Rimbaud’s statement: ‘L’autre c’est moi’).

The unnecessary squandering of life in armed conflict is precisely the kind of deadly *dépense* (expenditure) that Bataille was keen to circumvent in his promotion of

no-strings-attached financial aid programs such as the Marshall Plan (Bataille 1967: 203-225). The watch that Bazil wears, retrieved from a box of his father's personal effects returned after his death, bears the words 'Armée d'Afrique'—a fitting reminder of the violent postcolonial world order, writ large on a timepiece. Yet, aside from Bazil's father, *Micmacs* shows surprisingly few deaths for a film that revolves around the global arms industry. When one of the rival arms manufacturer's munitions factory explodes, the (white) couple who inadvertently detonate the bomb are shown straggling out of the wreckage alive, and the television news report of the incident is careful to note that, miraculously, there were no fatalities. The (white) arms manufacturers themselves, the pantomime baddies of the piece, escape unscathed, if ruined and humiliated. Nearly the only fatalities shown are the African dictator's representatives, who are killed during the confrontation between the rival arms dealers and Bazil. Their corpses remain in shot like so many pieces of furniture while the other characters sort out their various entanglements. Otherwise, the only other death shown in the film is that of a black football player blown up in a fantasy sequence. These Africans are the film's collateral damage, reduced to pure objects (corpses) when the life is taken from them. The only death for which vengeance is specifically sought in the film is that of Bazil's (white) father.

The other Africans depicted in the film are shown to be in a prosthetic relationship with the white French arms dealers, used as tools by them to achieve their objectives. There is the African domestic worker (country of origin not specified) in Marconi's house who looks after his young son; and the cleaner at Marconi's company from Somalia whose husband is threatened with deportation if she does not help him sabotage his rival's munitions factory. Although globalisation and the posthuman both signify the erasure of borders (in the case of globalisation, between

countries, and in the case of the posthuman, between humans and the material world), the collapse of boundaries is in neither case unproblematic. In a globalized world, the logic of substitution is everywhere at work: a vacant lot in Paris can stand in for the Middle East, and a bunch of French misfits can play the role of Middle Eastern mothers of landmine victims; but likewise, human beings can be slotted in for one another, as so many spare parts rendered interchangeable with one another and with the objects that surround them.

Thus objectified, the Africans in *Micmacs* resemble the body parts of deceased celebrities collected by Nicolas Thibault de la Fenouillet, and displayed in glass cases in his living room. Included in the arms dealer's collection are the crooner Tino Rossi's vertebrae Winston Churchill's fingernail clippings, Assyrian king Shalmaneser I's foot; French king Louis XVI's heart, painter Henri Matisse's finger, and Marilyn Monroe's molar. The collection is the emblematic mode of possession in commodity culture, the gesture of infinitely renewed supplementarity. There will always be new fall and spring collections, just as there will always be more body parts to collect as long as people keep dying, whether they're celebrities who overdose on drugs, or anonymous people killed as 'collateral damage'. Missing from his collection, we are told, is Mussolini's eye, whose attempted acquisition triggers the series of events that lead to the arms dealers' eventual downfall. The fact that part of a fascist leader holds such importance in the eyes of the collector is very significant. Commodity culture's emphasis on exchange value necessitates the kind of instrumental reason that, when applied to human beings, results in their objectification, and makes them available for exploitation or worse (see Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). That the coveted body part is an eye is also significant: it is the organ of sight (or the eye of the camera) that enables an active viewing position and

thus subjectivity. This subjectivity is negated when the eye becomes something to-be-looked-at, i.e., an object.

*Micmacs* stages a rematerialization of the image, a transformation of the crystal-image into crystal-object. This recuperation of the material world is analogous to what James Clifford has described as salvage ethnography, in which the anthropologist tries to preserve cultural traditions that are disappearing under the entropic forces of globalisation (Clifford 1986: 98-121). The crystal-object is a nostalgic reaction to increasing abstraction: this reactive transformation has already been inaugurated in haptic cinema, but finds its logical conclusion in the return to objects themselves. Haptic cinema would be a function of the drive to salvage materiality before it disappears completely within capitalism's regime of abstraction. Although *Micmacs* is not haptic cinema, in its emphasis on salvage both literal and figurative, it performs its own nostalgic return to the material world. This return reaches its logical conclusion in the film's final image, of a woman's blouse and skirt twirling on a clothes hanger in mid-air independent of any human wearer, lifeless yet full of life. The supplement has replaced what it was meant to supplement, as Derrida envisaged (Derrida 1997: 141-57; 313-16). The prosthesis steps into the role of the human, as tools take over from their makers, and humans become prostheses: the human cannonball is a metonym for the former colonial subjects who can be blackmailed into sabotaging a munitions factory, or who can serve as cannon fodder in a world war. Similarly, a woman who can bend into any shape and fold herself up into a cardboard box or a refrigerator is a none-too-subtle metaphor for women who are bent to the will of men, as confirmed at the end of the film, when Bazil grabs la Môme en Caoutchouc (who doesn't seem to have a proper name) by her hood and pulls her head toward him in what is presented as an affectionate gesture, but which,

despite its allusion to the *danse des apaches* fashionable around the time of the First World War, is nonetheless uncomfortable to watch.

The complement to the abstraction performed in commodity culture is the reification of human beings, who become reduced to an assemblage of inanimate objects, like the body parts that the arms manufacturer Nicolas Thibault de la Fenouillet collects. The arms dealer's collection of body parts is the ultimate extension of commodity culture, in which there are few things that cannot be bought or sold. De la Fenouillet's hobby is also a busman's holiday, a compulsive repetition in his down time of the body parts he collects on the job blowing people up. "Marilyn's molar" and "Mussolini's eye" are ghostly substitutes for the missing limbs of the real child landmine victims in the photographs held up by the fake Middle Eastern mothers at the end of the film: these missing limbs are the only objects in the film that cannot be salvaged or reused, and whose deadly logic cannot be refused.

*Micmacs* thus explores the increasing resemblance between human beings and objects in the era of globalisation, facilitated by hyperconsumption; by structures of exploitation that reduce some people to spare parts to be slotted into a global machine; and by technologies that replace human memory with mechanised memory. Consumer culture, a key component of globalisation, posits that we must supplement ourselves with commodities without which we would otherwise be incomplete: but these prostheses, rather than enhancing us, end up creating the insufficiencies they were meant to overcome. We are engulfed in objects, to the extent that we ourselves are becoming objectified. At the same time, objects, especially technological objects, are being endowed with an increasing amount of autonomy, assuming roles that were once the preserve of human agency, including those of memory and perception. Humans are created by prostheses at least as much as we create them. We are



becoming the posthuman objects of globalisation, whose force is pharmacological: globalisation has the capacity to objectify people, making them susceptible to exploitation, but in the modes of resistance that it engenders, it also has the potential to create new structures for accommodating difference.

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